

Reflections

By: Larry Young, Director, Extended Employment Sheltered Workshops

The year was 1982. Compact discs and cameras that require no film enter the marketplace. USA Today is introduced and published locally all over the country with satellite feed of information. I became involved with sheltered workshops. That does not seem like that long ago. It is, however, almost a quarter century. As most of you know I will be retiring July 1. I have been reflecting on the 24 years I will have spent in the sheltered workshop program.

When I came to work for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in July of 1982 as a technical field supervisor, Otis Thompson was the director. I think the reason Otis hired me was because I was an alumnus of Drury University (Drury College at that time), his alma mater. Who says it's what you know? In 1982 Fulvio Franzi was a field supervisor, and Chuck Reade joined the department a couple of weeks after I did. That was quite a treat, working with Fulvio and Chuck combined. Fulvio went on to manage Boone Center a few months later, and Bill Kaltenborn was hired to take his place.

Having come from a private business prior to becoming a field supervisor, I was fascinated with the concept of people with disabilities being able to produce and compete in a manufacturing type environment. Even before I interviewed for the field supervisor job I made a trip to the Springfield Workshop, and to Webco Custom Industries in Marshfield, to become familiar with workshops. The workshop program was growing quickly back in the early eighties, but workshop facilities were not as nice as they are today. The main entry door at Webco opened into a room that was dark, and sitting in the middle of the room was a casket with the lid open. I quickly figured out that there was no body in it, but I was thinking to myself, 'What am I getting into?' Webco at the time made a lot of casket mattresses for local casket manufacturers.

In 1982 there were 80 workshops. State aid was \$5 per day. The average number of employees was 4561. The average hourly wage rate was \$.88. Production sales were \$13,413,812, and state aid paid was \$5,587,425.

Those first four years were formative years for me. I lived in Springfield, at that time, and called on the shops in the southern part of the state. I learned about pay procedures, and DOL regulations. I learned about OSHA requirements, and safety issues. I observed a lot of great production procedures at the workshops I visited that would help me help other shops. I also learned that each shop is different, depending on the size of the community, the board makeup, and most specifically the management style. I learned that good business practice is important to the operation of all workshops, but I also learned that the shops that did really well, had the best interests of their employees as their foremost objective and goal.

While there are some workshops today that need improvements in their physical facilities, there were many that needed improvement in the early eighties. I remember going to Tantone in Branson as a field supervisor. They were housed in a cave. Well, not really a cave, but it sure seemed like it. It was an enclosed storage facility under a parking lot of a grocery store. The only entrance was one swing door and one overhead garage door at the front of the unit. This was not the best situation from a safety standpoint, needless to say. They finally obtained a new building in the mid eighties.

Another facility I will never forget is the Pemiscot Progressive Industries plant at Hayti. Every time I went there I thought 'there was no way I would want to work here'. It was an old plant that had broken windows, no heat or lights to speak of, and the roof leaked. I remember visiting PPI after a rain storm one time, and picking my way around the puddles, and that was inside the building. In 1983 Martha Stevens took over as manager at PPI and there was no stopping her. Today, this is a warm, well lit facility. I believe it is the largest building in Hayti. All signs of the original facility are pretty well gone.

In 1986 the manager's position at Springfield Workshop became available. I was lucky enough to get that position and served as manager there until 1993. Those seven years are almost a blur. It seemed like we were always so busy, and things were so frantic, that the time flew by unbelievably fast. I was lucky to have a great staff, board, and the support of some fantastic parents at Springfield, and it made my job a

real pleasure. It was the hardest job I ever had though, so I know what you guys go through day in and day out. It was hard mainly because of the responsibility of keeping enough work in the shop for the number of people we employed, and keeping it fiscally sound. We went from 120 employees in 1986 to 200 in 1993. With growth came the burden of more work. I never wanted to be responsible for any of those employees losing their jobs, so the pressure was on.

In 1986 when I started at Springfield there were 81 workshops and 5,532 employees. The average hourly wage was \$.96 and total wages paid was \$7,008,377.97. The daily state aid was \$5 and total state aid paid was \$6,669,360. Production income in 1986 was \$20,712,155.

In 1993 Otis Thompson retired and I came back to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as the director of sheltered workshops. This has been quite an experience. It indeed has had its moments, as do all jobs. Overall it has been a great job, with the opportunity to work with a lot of great people. Gary Schneider had been added to the trio of field supervisors, and I have always appreciated his contemplative input regarding problems. I have admired the way a lot of managers and boards have made such resourceful efforts to improve the life and welfare of their employees. I have seen vast improvements in the physical facilities of many shops in the past thirteen years. I've seen new and innovative job opportunities and revenue sources. Some shops are turning more to service jobs rather than contract jobs, a case in point would be the NISH janitorial contracts that some shops are participating in, and the state rest area and conservation maintenance contracts. Other shops have gotten into recycling on a large scale. Others have opened thrift stores and, just recently, even a retail dollar store. Workshop managers and boards must continue to think outside the box to derive more and varied revenue sources. The typical workshop jobs of packaging and simple assembly will become scarcer as automation and overseas outsourcing become more prevalent. The future will bring even more of a challenge for all concerned. Only by being willing to explore new opportunities, and broadening their horizons will workshops be able to survive. I have faith though that you all will do just that, and the future of workshops will continue to look bright.

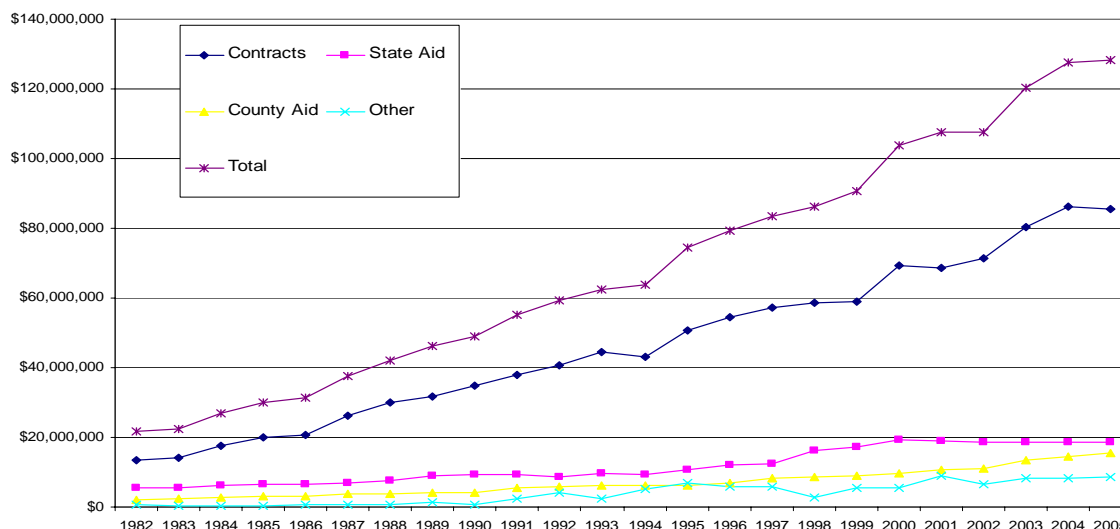
There have been a couple of incidents that have affected me more than anything else over the years. One was the mother I was taking on a tour of the workshop in Springfield with her son shortly after I became manager. I noticed tears on her cheeks as we were touring the facilities, and I asked if there was anything wrong. She simply said that she did not realize there was anything like this for her son. The other incident was an employee who had had several health problems and had failed to show up for work one day. I, and an employee, a friend of his, went to his apartment to check on him. We knocked and got no answer. His door was unlocked so I ventured in calling his name. We found him dead on the floor. Knowing he was going to die someday, he had left instructions for his funeral, and the names of the people he wanted to be pall bearers. I was quite touched and honored that he had named me as one of those people. He left all of his worldly possessions to the workshop. That is what the workshop meant to him. I could relate more stories, but this is an idea of what this job is really about. It is about making peoples lives better and providing a meaningful and dignified environment for them. That is what you are really charged to do. If you lose sight of that, it is time to make a change. Remember, if it wasn't for your employees, none of us would have jobs.

In 1993 there were 88 workshops. State aid was \$7.00 per day. The average number of employees was 7361. The average hourly wage was \$1.47. Production income was \$43,290,110 and state aid paid was \$9,486,390.

This past fiscal year of 2005 there were 92 workshops. State aid was \$13.00 per day. The average number of employees was 7287. The average hourly was \$2.31. Production income was \$85,354,926 and state aid paid was \$18,484,050.

The following chart provides a visual analysis of the fiscal growth of workshops over the past twenty four years.

Workshop Revenue 1982-2005



Thanks to all of you who have worked with me over the years. I have a great deal of admiration for the job that you do. I would just like to remind you that while the workshops are small businesses and they must be operated as such, the primary objective is not the bottom line, however, it is the people we employ. It is the providing of jobs for those who would otherwise not be able to be employed.

I want to especially thank the field supervisors and our office support staff for their work over the years. Sandy Kliethermes is currently our office support staff. She has been tremendous to work with over the past years. Without these staff members this job couldn't get done.

I have had some very supportive bosses through the years also, Graham Williams, Rick Hutcherson, and Dale Carlson. All have supported the workshop program and done what they could to provide us with the tools we need to make this work. They have also provided some very timely advice when needed, and for that I am very grateful.

I'm not going to say goodbye to any of you. I reserve the right to drop in on you at any time. Don't be surprised to see a truck with a camper pull into your parking lot someday.

Best wishes for the future.